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IMPRESSIONS FROM THE CASTLE PRESS

Grant Dahlstrom

Interviewed by Richard F. Docter

Completed under the auspices  
of the  
Oral History Program  
University of California  
Los Angeles

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Photograph of Grant Dahlstrom by Marilyn Sanders.



## INTRODUCTION

I have known Grant since the 1930s. Only slightly then. I was at the Huntington as a page. But I had begun my involvement with printing. Grant was beginning his long-term association with the Huntington: the literate typographer and the library with an interest in fine printing. I came to know Grant well after the war. In 1946, when I was demobbed, Grant, much to my surprise, asked if I'd like to work in his shop. He had in mind a kind of apprentice to himself. I spent a supremely happy six months at 136 West Union Street. I used to work, often till two in the morning, oblivious to time. I loved that shop. As others have. As Vance Gerry, my predecessor, did and has described in A Boy Printer at the Castle Press. Only the lemminglike folly of the unformed and ill-formed made me think I had to go back to school, to art school, and then to college. Some marvelous things, of course, then happened to me. More than I deserved. But I gave up a priceless opportunity. I salvaged, happily, a priceless friendship. It is in the light of our laughter together over the years that I read this bit of oral history.

This is my first brush with oral history. It is not a requisite that a psychologist be educated. But I have friends who read history. And I gather from them that it is





fashionable to recognize that what is written as history is very much in the eye of the historian, the writer. I approached this oral history, this transcript of an interview, with the sense that it would be a taste of the real, unfiltered, firsthand stuff. A primary source. Certainly, it has much of value, and of history.

I realize now, though, that even an interview is not a simple thing. It quickly became evident it could provide at least three things: what Grant said; how Grant said it; and what Grant did not say. My experience with Grant has led me to interpret what was said, to imagine how things were said, and to reach for what was not said.

First, with respect to what was said, there is the content, the words, the literal accounts and descriptions qua history: Grant's account of Saul's beginnings; Grant's account of his own progress from Idaho to Los Angeles by way of the Laboratory Press; to 536 North Fairfax by way of 136 West Union Street--the Castle Press; Grant's descriptions of how he works and most interesting, his descriptions of the influences of his work: Updike, Rogers, Francis Meynell, the Curwen Press, the British University Press--gentlemen printers all, educated, even scholarly, and always informed by taste, a sense of history, and, as we shall note later, by "order and clarity." (It is significant to realize, as Grant says, that he left the Laboratory Press, not for



financial reasons--or not for these alone--but because Carnegie Tech had no more to offer him. I believe it. Already, this literate man, associate in college of the young Bernard De Voto, had educated himself equally in typographic taste, a taste that would always show itself to be unobtrusively informed and appropriate.)

Just outside the "content," in the shadow and shaping of that content, is how he said it, the way he says things: the choice of phrase or word; the selection of what to say, the facet of the man he chooses to describe. Grant responds to questions about a number of figures in printing: inevitably, the two contemporaries with whom he is always linked, Saul Marks and Ward Ritchie. And Gregg Anderson, Ward's partner. With each of these he held a common history over (except for Gregg, cut down in the war) nearly fifty years. Grant and Saul and Ward are inevitably linked by reason of a common time and place and a common kind of eminence: their excellence in printing. His descriptions (characteristic of Grant) are scrupulous but, I think, revealing. With Gregg there is a quiet kind of feeling ("I tried to cultivate him") and a sadness at not having known Gregg better. With the other two there is a kind of distance. Certainly some of this is professional circumspection. But some of it is the quality of distance that obtained between these men. They were unlike in temperament



and personal style. Knowing this helps one to be aware of the differences that exist in their approach to printing and in their final work.

What Grant does not say reflects his own awareness of these differences. There are other names: Larry Powell, John Henry Nash, Merle Armitage. By contrast, to his tone with Gregg is his opinion of Merle Armitage's typography. (I apologize to a dear friend, herself a designer, for leaving this comment in. She appreciates Armitage.) The Rounce and Coffin crew, especially the old hard core of printers, liked to posture as sturdy craftsmen, printers, and would almost invariably lay about them with a fine, contemptuous phrase when it came to designers, particularly those who mucked around in printing. Grant echoes this, in conscious jest, but also expresses a very real difference in taste. I can remember, indeed, his finely honed distaste on the subject of Armitage's work. In the interview he says, "I don't know what the use of it was, but anyway it was printed on handmade paper and bound in black paper, black Fabriano, and it was a typical Armitage effusion." Effusion is pure Grant. It would be delivered, this passage, with a grave, straight face, with only the normal pair of Dahlstrom tics and a thoughtful, somewhat abstracted solemnity. (There might be an appreciative, barely discernible twinkle. It would be followed by a



laugh only if all this were picked up by an appreciative auditor.) Effusion is pure Grant, too, because he loved words and chose them carefully and then let them lumber out in apparent casual disregard. Dictionaries. He was always pressing an arcane dictionary of humor on me. Or citing Mencken. Or quoting Perlman. Or verse, especially, awkward nineteenth-century verse, which he loved to quote--with owl-like solemnity--like the nineteenth-century picture postcards he kept under glass on his office coffee table. There is another characteristic comment: a reference in the typescript to John Henry Nash, apparently to "Madam Nash." The "Madam" is crossed out in the edited typescript and replaced by "Henry." If "Madam" it was, it would have perfectly conveyed Grant's opinion of Nash.

There is a counterweight, however, in the typescript: gentle, reflective thoughtfulness as counterweight to the rumbling barb. One need only read the remarks on a friend from college days, the Swedish typographer, Zachrisson, to see the obvious respect for the achievement of maturity and the regret for the loss of the gaiety of youth. (They must have had fun, those two, when they were young.)

Frequently, the way he says things gives clue to an important side of Grant, his playfulness. It was almost always there, for those who appreciated it to enjoy and for those who were busy about other things to let go





unnoticed and to let slip by. Like the reference in the transcript to his grandson's affinity for athletics. Grant's response, as I think often in this transcript, reflects a bit of contrariness, a reaction to his interviewer's too ready approval of the boy's affinity. Grant says, "Well, it's kind of hard on him; he's busted his knee (a deliberate choice of verb) in a rugby match in January and was laid up for a couple of months. Athletics is just no place for anybody as far as I can see." (Ah, yes, typical Grant.)

Grant was a subtle man. I can remember a "lovely, lovely," to an eager, self-advertising calligrapher from the East, pressing samples at a Rounce & Coffin dinner table. Devastating. (The man was pleased.) But, again, as counterweight, there is the gentle and appreciative handling of the William Everson anecdote: the obvious respect (and maybe a little regret for a path abandoned himself, of necessity).

As he grew older, and less well, one sensed Grant was sometimes on the edge of crustiness. But carefully. He handled it with civility and with a nice touch of self mockery: "How are you this day, Mr. D.?" "Tetchy, Mr. P., tetchy." For all his sometimes contrariness, he was never, in my experience, an unkind man. Taciturn and circumspect in public discourse, sometimes as you will frequently find him here. And if there was sometimes more than first met the ear, it was not meanness. It was just the subtly formed



and well-enjoyed channel for annoyance or disapprobation, shared with friends who felt the same and who enjoyed the game. And, again, as Steve Allen says of Woody, one was sometimes not sure where the put-on began or where it stopped. Grant was the master of obliquity, the connoisseur of obscurity.

Finally, in this matter of oral history, and actually some of this is implicit above, the interview can provide intimations about the man or about his relations with others, intimations that come from what Grant leaves out, what he elects not to say. Sometimes this is at formal request. Early in the interview Grant gives a firm no to a discussion of his politics--though he was a concerned and active participant in community causes and in liberal Democratic politics.

Docter: Let's talk a little bit about your own political and social outlook.

Dahlstrom: Well, actually, I don't see much of a connection there between that and what my work turned out to be . . . separate and I don't see how one influenced the other.

More often, Grant's expression is through the monosyllable--or, more precisely, the disyllable. A resistance.

It should be noted that an overly correcting editing has lost some of this essential Dahlstrom quality. The interview is a great deal of the time "monosyllabic." Grant was a private man, particularly not given to talking



about himself. A non-self-revealing man. This interview must have been difficult. He speaks at the end of being a little bored with himself the last half hour or so and replies to Docter's thanks, "It's a tale twice told to me." When he found himself in a situation not to his liking he could be eloquently monosyllabic. But it is unwise editing to cross out yeah and substitute yes. Yeah was a deliberate choice. Or to rule out OK, an accepting assent to a proposed change of direction but still in the vein of yeah. Most violent of all is the editing out of uh-huh (or ah-huh or ah-hah). That was the most characteristic of all Grantisms. It was, indeed, his supreme social achievement. Its stage setting was, of course, the marvelous changing lights of carefully calculated tics and grimaces, the rolling blink of first the right eye and then the left eye, all in an unobtrusive, slightly garish gloss, passing like a nicely formed wave across the imperturbable gnomelike face with an echoing, muted grimace, first, with the right side of the mouth and, then, the left. A connoisseur's face-play. Ah-hah and uh-huh are but approximations of a long, long continuum of carefully orchestrated forms of sound and meaning that accompanied the grimace. Their implications were as varied and expressive as the most articulate of word-rich ripostes; their meaning ranged--not always to the auditor's awareness--from "Yes, I think I follow you;



please, say some more" to "Yes, it would be a labor of Hercules to express how little I agree with you and how much I despair of expressing that disagreement to your probably discrepant comprehension."

What else is left out I'm sure is a function of limitation of intent. Docter only intended, I would judge, to get Grant's view of his contemporaries and of his own work. But it would have been fun to have had more. Besides what I have hinted at, there were Grant's interests in the arts, in reading and books, in collecting, in travel, in wines, in food, in gardening--he published his own horticultural journal--many of these interests conducted with his marvelous wife, Helen. (Helen Dahlstrom is a story--a history--in herself, deserving to be told. My own marvelous wife, Helen, used always to say, well into her own forties, indeed even today, "I should like to be like Helen Dahlstrom when I grow up." Amen. A great lady.)

One must acknowledge the contribution of such descriptions as that of Saul's beginnings, as well as Grant's own odyssey. I found valuable Grant's pointing out of Saul's modeling himself on Fournier. I also found valuable, informing, and credible Grant's descriptions of the formative influences in his own work, especially Updike and the British printers, the gentlemen printers whose work, like his, served thoughtfully a commercial





(though educated) market and did so with intelligence, a sense for history, for taste, and in Grant's own words, for "order and clarity." Grant was a man of taste in everything. Let me just add something that is really not within the scope of this interview, but I find it is not commented on in the general words of praise. As he grew older, Grant did not simply continue in the same way that he had always done, but got freer and lighter in his designs. As a psychologist interested in development, I find that notable. As one who knew Grant, I find it not surprising.

I have enjoyed much in this transcript. Frequently I have been frustrated. The interviewer clearly had a checklist in his mind and would not easily take a cue from Grant. Nor did he seem to know much of Grant; nor could he draw it out. Grant was a good printer, an excellent one. It's just that he was so much more. Forgive me, if I have let my fondness for this lovely man carry me to excess. Grant disapproved of excess.

Let me close with an anecdote from Miv Schaaf's essay "In Memory of an Expert Typographer." It appeared in the Los Angeles Times of 25 February 1981. It does more justice than I have to the spirit I've tried to capture:

I had an experience with Grant I would like to have told; it happened just a year or so ago. I was picking up a printing order, talking with the secretary about something she had liked in one of my columns, and Grant came out of his



dark office to say hello. "Didn't you like that one about nasturtiums?" the secretary asked Grant.

"No," he said. "I didn't read it. I never read Miv's column," looking right at me. "I'm not interested in dogs and old kitchen tables and weeds and spoons and lamp pulls and ponds and the undersides of leaves and porches and cobblestone chimneys and birds and bungalows and bushes." That was the first time I was sure he really liked me.

There will be a lot of people--now, twenty, thirty, forty years from now--who will not have known Grant Dahlstrom but who will miss him and they will not all be typographers, designers, and graphic artists. Grant Edward Dahlstrom, 1902-1980, Typographer, Printer, Publisher, Gardener, the memorial gathering card announced.

I had not known he was also an expert gardener. I am sorry I was not brave enough, presuming enough, to know Grant better, to walk with him in his garden. He could have told me a lot about flowers as well as fleurons.

--David Palmer, April 1982



## INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER: Richard F. Docter, professor of psychology, California State University, Northridge. Hobby printer and member of the Rounce & Coffin Club. B.A., UCSB; Ph.D., Stanford.

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Dahlstrom's office, Castle Press, Pasadena.

Dates: May 5 and 13, 1975.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: The interviews, lasting about two hours each, were conducted midmorning. A total of three hours of conversation was recorded.

Persons present during interview: Dahlstrom and Docter.

### CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

Docter writes:

I had known Grant Dahlstrom since 1959, when I became a member of the Rounce & Coffin Club. He had been one of its founders in 1931 and always attended its meetings. Grant was a hearty, outgoing, friendly fellow, who made newcomers feel welcome. He was also one of the four or five premier printers and typographic designers in Southern California; I was familiar with his work from exhibitions at the Huntington Library which I had seen in the early 1950s.

The goal of this interview was to obtain a life history using Grant's occupational activities as a central theme. A secondary goal was to elicit his recollections of people prominent in the printing and book design field.

There are several examples within this interview of Grant's legendary tactic of "leg pulling," such as his saying that he did not know how to lock up a form in a chase or how to get a job on a press. He was a highly experienced practical printer who knew very well how to do everything that had to be done in a moderate-sized commercial shop.



The work of Grant Dahlstrom and considerable biographical information about him has been printed in books concerned with fine printing in Southern California.

#### EDITING:

The editing of the manuscript was done by Deborah Young, assistant editor, Oral History Program. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, editing for spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing, and verifying proper nouns. Words and phrases she inserted are bracketed.

The edited transcript was submitted to Dahlstrom for review. He passed away during that process (September 21, 1980), and the manuscript, along with other papers, was given by his wife to a professional colleague, David Davies. Eventually it found its way back to the Oral History Program office, where it was reviewed and prepared for final typing by Mitch Tuchman, senior editor. Mrs. Dahlstrom and Docter were helpful in answering remaining editorial queries.

The introduction to the volume was written by printer David Palmer. Other front matter and the index were prepared by Oral History Program staff.





TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

MAY 8, 1975

DOCTER: What we've usually done on these interviews is to try to begin with a biographical foundation, so to speak, try to get a permanent record, a thorough record of a person's biography. I wonder if we could begin by my asking you just the obvious biographical facts, like where you were born and when, for example, whether you had any brothers and sisters. Could you fill us in on this?

DAHLSTROM: I was born in Idaho Falls, Idaho, in 1902. I had eleven brothers and sisters, that is, eleven siblings.

DOCTER: And where did you come along the line?

DAHLSTROM: Number eight, I think. We were living in a town in which there was a great deal of infant mortality. About six of the children died in infancy or childhood.

DOCTER: Could you say a word or two about your father and mother. What did your dad do?

DAHLSTROM: My father was a blacksmith. He owned two blacksmith shops in this town and was a city councilman and an official in the Mormon church. He came over here when he was three years old with his parents, who were Mormon converts from Sweden. My mother came over when she was ten, in the same circumstances.

DOCTER: Did they go directly to Idaho?



DAHLSTROM: They went directly to Utah, and then he-- Well, I don't know where he spent most of his youth, but I do know that he, when I was born, had this blacksmith's shop in Idaho Falls. [inaudible]

My mother's parents had a small farm in Ogden, Utah, so I guess she grew up there.

My father-- His father was quite a rover: he was a prospector and he worked as a blacksmith for the railroad to bring it across the plains.

DOCTER: It would have been your grandfather.

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: And was he the immigrating member of the family, then, your grandfather, who brought your father with him?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Both sets of grandparents were immigrants.

DOCTER: And do you recall offhand when they came to the United States?

DAHLSTROM: Well, let's see. That's eighty-one years. My father lived in Utah and Idaho for eighty-one years of his eighty-four, so I guess it was in the [eighteen] seventies or eighties.

DOCTER: I see.

DAHLSTROM: I guess the seventies.

DOCTER: You attended school and grew up then in Idaho Falls?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. I was there until I was seventeen years



old. Then the family moved down to Ogden, Utah, and I was there until 1927, when I came down here.

DOCTER: And what were some of the early jobs that you held as a youngster. Could you tell us about any of the work that you did and how it ultimately led to your--

DAHLSTROM: Well, the first thing that came in that connects with printing, [when] I was in high school I taught myself lettering and did sign cards for furniture stores and local people.

DOCTER: Show cards.

DAHLSTROM: Yes. That's about all that was connected with it. The way I got into printing was I was active in school publications, and a printer that I worked with in that respect offered me a job when I came out of high school.

DOCTER: What printing was going on in Idaho Falls? Were there several print shops?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, this was in Ogden.

DOCTER: Oh, in Ogden. Did you have any contact at all with printing in Idaho Falls?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Yes. I worked on school publications there, too.

DOCTER: Were those hand-set?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, no, they had Linotypes then. It wasn't that long ago--as old as I am.

DOCTER: It wasn't ancient history.



DAHLSTROM: No.

DOCTER: Well, the reason I ask, when I was in junior high school, they actually did hand-set the weekly newspaper, just as an exercise for experience.

DAHLSTROM: Oh, yes. Well, that's something else.

DOCTER: Well, now what did some of your brothers and sisters do in terms of careers? Where did they go? Could you say a word or two about them?

DAHLSTROM: Well, my one surviving brother was an accountant working for what later became the Mayfair markets.

DOCTER: Here in Los Angeles?

DAHLSTROM: In Ogden. That's a Mormon corporation. They were in Ogden, in Salt Lake.

The print shop that I went into in 1921 was a very good shop. It was owned by a man with money, who finally never did make a profit out of it. But it was a handsome shop, well equipped, and they did some very good work. He brought in designers and typesetters from Pittsburgh. A fellow named Arthur Gruver was one, and there was a Stanley Williams that had worked with Nash in San Francisco, and there was a fellow named Heinzmann, whose father was a well-known printer in Boston. And they were all very helpful to me. I learned a great deal there, so that when I came down here, I was able to ask for a pretty good job in design. Design was much more simple then than it is now.





It was primarily arrangement of type. They were just beginning to use advertising artists. When I went to work in this shop, I was just an office boy. All the design, most of the design, was done by the comp.

DOCTER: Is that right? The compositor?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Who came to work in a fine blue serge suit and a white celluloid collar, and he had his tools with him: his line gauges and readers and everything, his-- I've forgotten the name of it. Anyway, he set those up on the bank and would-- He was in charge of all design. Copy went up to him, and he put it directly into type.

DOCTER: I see.

DAHLSTROM: When I started to make sketches--design specifications--I'd send them up there, and he'd look at them and likely as not would just throw them aside and set them the way they should be set.

DOCTER: Now, this would have been just after--

DAHLSTROM: This is '21.

DOCTER: --World War I. What kinds of printing would that shop have been involved in then?

DAHLSTROM: Everything that you could find--

DOCTER: General job printing.

DAHLSTROM: General job printing. The owner of the shop had notions of becoming a publisher, producing somewhat on the order of the Little Blue Books.



DOCTER: Oh, yes. From Kansas.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, Gerard, Kansas. And he was going along on that, but he had no way-- He didn't understand that he had to get out and sell them. So he printed them up, and they piled up. He had some money behind him; his family had money. His family had an oil well for a while. They used up the million dollars that they got out of that in short order. And he was married into a family that had money, so that he kept on going long after he wasn't making anything at all.

DOCTER: What was the name of the shop?

DAHLSTROM: Scoville Press.

DOCTER: And do you recall what its history was? Did it finally close under his direction, or were--

DAHLSTROM: Yes, it finally closed.

DOCTER: So this man had aspirations for high-quality work and apparently some judgment on hiring personnel as well, brought in very fine people.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, uh-huh.

DOCTER: Particularly for a job shop.

What about some of the competitive shops around? Could you describe what a job shop of that period might have been like in Ogden, or in any community for that matter?

DAHLSTROM: Well, not much different from what a job shop is now, except that there were some items that you would



never see in a shop now. Every farmer--it was a farming community--every farmer produced his own butter and sold it, packaged it. So we would print the butter wrappers, which was eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheet of parchment paper with the farmer's name and address printed in the middle in blue ink.

DOCTER: Always?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: I don't think I've ever seen a butter wrapper like that.

DAHLSTROM: I should have saved them.

DOCTER: But you perhaps have none.

DAHLSTROM: No, I don't have any. And, of course, there was church printing. There was not much printing done for business actually. There was very little printed advertising.

DOCTER: The church materials would have been announcements, I suppose?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, yes.

DOCTER: Weddings?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, weddings-- Well, the Mormon church was very active, kept its members very active in social things, so that there was a lot of that sort of thing. But it was not a very good town for printing, as no town had much use for printing in those days. Well, a small town never does actually.



DOCTER: Did your family, many of the brothers and sisters, stay in the Ogden area, or did some of them come to California? How did you happen to decide to come west?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I'd been to school at Carnegie Tech for a year.

DOCTER: Could you tell us about that: how you happened to go, what you did there?

DAHLSTROM: Well, Porter Garnett was teaching there at the time, and that was a very well-known school for printing technology. The big ITU plant was later moved there, too.

DOCTER: What is ITU?

DAHLSTROM: The International--

DOCTER: Typographical Union?

DAHLSTROM: Not the union, no. The ITA. No, UTA, that's it: United Typothetae of America, which no longer exists. I think it's something-- It became the Printing Industry Association [Printing Industry of America].

DOCTER: So this was a center?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, this was a very good place. Porter Garnett had a number of classes there, and they had a big shop, laboratory shop, and they offered a Bachelor of Science degree in printing engineering. But I took just one year, and my money ran out, came back to Utah, and, of course, nothing much-- There was not much opportunity there, so I came down here.





DOCTER: Now, what was the year that you spent in Pennsylvania? It was in Pennsylvania, in Pittsburgh?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, '26. It was the school year of '26-27.

DOCTER: Now, if we can just get the chronology nailed down here. Do you recall what year you moved to Ogden from Idaho Falls?

DAHLSTROM: Nineteen nineteen.

DOCTER: And at that time did you go right to work for Scoville Press?

DAHLSTROM: No, I didn't go to work there until two years later.

DOCTER: What were you doing then in 1919?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I was still in high school, and I took a year of college after high school.

DOCTER: At what college?

DAHLSTROM: Weber.

DOCTER: Oh, yes, yes. Is that in southern-- That's not in Ogden, is it?

DAHLSTROM: That's in Ogden.

DOCTER: They've recently changed the name, I think. No, is it still called Weber?

DAHLSTROM: Uh-huh.

DOCTER: But it's four years.

DAHLSTROM: You're thinking of BYU, which is down in Provo.

DOCTER: Well, I was actually thinking of the one down in



Cedar City, which they've changed into a four-year college, I think. But in any case, was your first job then at Scoville?

DAHLSTROM: In printing, yes.

DOCTER: Had you been employed in any particularly interesting or unusual jobs before that?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, well, even before I went to high school, I worked in a confectioner's store, running their automatic popcorn machine. That's about the best I could do, in Idaho.

DOCTER: That was a part-time job?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, yes, this was after school.

DOCTER: All right then. Approximately 1919, I think, you came down to Ogden and finished school, and in approximately 1921, if I have the dates correct, you would have gone to work in the print shop for the first time.

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: And did you then work continually in that shop until you went to Carnegie Tech?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: Though it would have been about five years--

DAHLSTROM: Uh-huh.

DOCTER: --in that shop. What assignments did you have? You said you went there as an office boy. I'll bet you weren't an office boy the whole five years.



DAHLSTROM: No. No, I became interested in the design of printing. There was a pretty good library, though it was small. The best thing that they had there for me was the bound volumes of Printing Art, which was published in Boston, and I used to study those pretty well. And that gave me a lot of information on design. So after about a year and a half I moved up in the composing room and stayed there until I went east--and then down here.

DOCTER: Right. Now, we certainly want to spend a lot of time talking about printing, but if you don't mind my sticking with family things just a little longer in order that those who might be interested in this might have as much information as possible. Could you say just a few words about your parents? What were they like? And how did they operate the family?

DAHLSTROM: Well, they were fairly prosperous, but they worked-- They were pretty hardworking people. My father worked a ten- or twelve-hour day, six days a week, and all winter and summer; [he] got up before dawn in the winter, came home after sunset, on foot, walking through the snow in the town, small town. So he lived a kind of a hard life. By the time he was fifty-two, he decided to retire.

DOCTER: Do you recall the street address where you lived in Idaho Falls?

DAHLSTROM: 421 H Street. I was born on D Street, but I don't



remember the number.

DOCTER: But most of your childhood, then, was spent at that one location?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: Is H Street close to the center of Idaho Falls?

I'm not familiar with how the streets are lettered.

DAHLSTROM: Well, I guess they started with A.

DOCTER: So I guess it would be within walking distance of--

DAHLSTROM: Well, you had to walk wherever you went unless you had a horse and buggy, or later a car.

DOCTER: Now, Idaho Falls is a very prominent Mormon center, with a temple, isn't it?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, that all happened after I left.

DOCTER: Oh, is that right?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, you see, this was more than fifty years ago that I lived there.

DOCTER: And there was no temple at that time?

DAHLSTROM: No, and there was only one Mormon church in the place. Just about half and half.

DOCTER: Now, when you say it was a reasonably prosperous family, I'm sure what you're saying is that there wasn't a great concern about money, but there probably wasn't a lot of extra money in the sense of having luxuries. Could you comment on the standard of living?

DAHLSTROM: Well, my father was, in effect, sort of a





natural socialist, and, as I picture the times in that town, money was not kept very close track of by anyone. He did not send out any bills or statements. Everybody was supposed to pay him on their own recognizance. He kept no records, so--

DOCTER: It was before the income tax.

DAHLSTROM: [laughter] The only tax he paid was the tithing, and he guessed at that. Well, similar to income tax. Anyway, he was very openhanded, especially with his own brothers, and although he did survive and did have a certain amount of money when he retired, even with the inflation of that time, maybe it was a little difficult for him to get along with in his old age.

DOCTER: And your mother? How would you describe your mother?

DAHLSTROM: Well, she was much too hardworking, much too serious. I guess she was kind of an unhappy person. She didn't have much of a social life. She spent all of her time at home in the kitchen.

DOCTER: Was she actively involved in the church?

DAHLSTROM: When she was young, yes.

DOCTER: But this didn't give her the same social satisfaction that some people get from it?

DAHLSTROM: Well, when she lost three or four of her children in childhood, she became very ingrown and melancholy. So, I guess, that's what happened to her.



DOCTER: How strict a household was it?

DAHLSTROM: Well, not very, not very. It wasn't any stricter than the general social environment of the town. Actually, actually, the children of the household began to play cards and do things like that at one time in their lives.

DOCTER: But not on the Sabbath.

DAHLSTROM: I don't remember. [laughter]

DOCTER: Are there any particular recollections about growing up in Idaho Falls at that period in history that might be interesting for us to know about? Do you have any early memories of it that might be noted?

DAHLSTROM: Nothing in particular. It was a small town, not too far from its frontier period. It was an agricultural town: potatoes and onions and wheat. Very bare. There was very rich soil there. Big river running through it.

DOCTER: The Snake?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. It was very flat, very flat. But you could see, on a clear day, instead of Catalina, you could see the Teton peaks.

DOCTER: Now, that would have been to the south?

DAHLSTROM: To the northeast.

DOCTER: Northeast. Oh, my. Way off.

DAHLSTROM: The schools, as I remember, were good. They



were interesting to me. When I got to high school, they taught languages there: I had Latin, I had Spanish. No peripheries such as athletics.

DOCTER: None?

DAHLSTROM: They were able to concentrate on education. No, not at all. Not even ROTC. But I felt interested in school, not that I was much of a scholar, but I enjoyed it.

DOCTER: Beside the languages, were there any other particular--

DAHLSTROM: Well, there was a regular course: mathematics, English, English literature, chemistry, physics.

DOCTER: And you participated in many of these?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, I took the regular courses required. The high school had a little publication, had an annual, which I worked on. It was a fairly satisfactory school life.

DOCTER: Do you recall about how many students graduated in that graduating class in 1919?

DAHLSTROM: Well, this was 1920 that I graduated from high school, after we came down to Ogden. No, I don't. I think there were about three or four hundred, about three hundred in the whole school. So, I guess it would be about a fifth of them, about sixty would be a graduating class.

DOCTER: What about the elementary school years? What was that like?



DAHLSTROM: That was a lot of fun. I enjoyed that. There were some tyrants in the teachers. There was corporal punishment, which I escaped somehow. But I thought the schools were well run. There was no indoor plumbing in this big, brick school that I started out in.

DOCTER: What school was that?

DAHLSTROM: That was the Riverside School. Drinking water was-- They had an outside toilet, and the drinking water was in the school, of course, in a row of big buckets with tin dippers in them. But it was a well-built school; it was no log cabin.

DOCTER: Adequately heated?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, yes.

The social life was centered in the Mormon church, as you would find anywhere where there are Mormons. The church takes up the whole social life of its members. They had dancing for young people, and old people, too. The other side of town, which was mostly Methodist and Presbyterian, Baptist, they didn't believe in any social life apparently, so those kids would all come over to the Mormon church for a little entertainment.

DOCTER: When you say the other side--

DAHLSTROM: Well, it was sort of divided right down the middle of town, the railroad track: on one side it was Mormon, and on the other side it was Gentiles.





DOCTER: Is that right? Is that right? They actually tended to select housing on one side or the other?

DAHLSTROM: Well, it was quite a new town, and I think possibly that they would gather together and build houses near each other, you see, near their friends.

DOCTER: As a youngster did you have any particular hobbies that occupied your time?

DAHLSTROM: Well, it was mostly, as I said, mostly lettering. That seemed a lot simpler and more within my grasp than general drawing. That's about the only thing I remember doing anything with.

DOCTER: Were you a collector of anything in particular?

DAHLSTROM: No.

DOCTER: Were any of your brothers and sisters in any way influential in helping to shape your own interests?

DAHLSTROM: No, no. It was curiously not a very cohesive family. We each seemed to go off in his own way.

DOCTER: Was the period of leaving home, nineteen- , twenty- , twenty-one- , twenty-two- year olds, was this a difficult time in any way for the family, or was it just taken in stride?

DAHLSTROM: Well, the boys stayed around home. Well, there was just my brother and I. We stayed at home until we went away or got married, which I did simultaneously.

DOCTER: When were you married, and could you tell us a



little about--

DAHLSTROM: In 1928, down here. I married an old school friend, Helen Slater, whom I knew-- We went to the same school. It was not until we were out of school that we really paid any attention to each other.

DOCTER: Was that the school in Ogden or in Idaho Falls?

DAHLSTROM: Ogden.

DOCTER: Well, then, we have sort of tracked chronologically through 1926, and now we're mentioning '28. If we may just now follow up from '26 to '27: I think you were at the Carnegie Tech printing lab with Porter Garnett and others. And then you came back to Ogden, or did you--

DAHLSTROM: Just for a couple of months, and then I came down here.

DOCTER: I see. And could you tell us a little about the decision to come? Why Los Angeles? Did you have any contacts or friends?

DAHLSTROM: Well, my employer had something to do with that. He offered to give me a ride down here. He had another print shop. He didn't have a place for me, but he offered to help me get another job down here.

DOCTER: Was his other shop here?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. That was Scoville Press, too.

DOCTER: Does that business name still exist?

DAHLSTROM: No. He went bankrupt sometime after, in about '29 or '30.



DOCTER: So he knew you wanted to consider another location and offered you a ride?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: What kind of a car did you come in?

DAHLSTROM: A Jewett coupe, and there were three of us sitting in that one little seat. And we drove straight through.

DOCTER: Without stopping?

DAHLSTROM: Well, we'd stop at the side of the road to get gas or to eat or to take a nap.

DOCTER: Was it a particularly memorable trip for you?

DAHLSTROM: Well, it was very uncomfortable. About the only thing that was interesting was when we came in to Highway 66, all those beautiful orange groves on each side. They had just started to put up traffic signals, electric, automatic traffic signals, then, and they were based on the semaphore: you would have a barrel ring, and here would come an arm down, says stop. And then one for go.

DOCTER: Now, how long would that trip have taken then? This was in 192- -- Was this in '27?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. It took about twenty-four hours, most of it.

DOCTER: Did you help drive?

DAHLSTROM: No, no. He was the boss; he did the driving.

DOCTER: This may seem strange, but what would be the



attraction of driving instead of coming on the train for a man like that? Why would he want to drive that trip in those days? Would it be for a vacation?

DAHLSTROM: Well, no, no. He used his car down here. And it was the thing to do: it got to be fashionable about that time. It took about the same amount of time on the train.

DOCTER: So it was a novelty in a sense?

DAHLSTROM: Well, yes.

DOCTER: What were the road conditions like? What month of the year did you make that trip?

DAHLSTROM: August. Oh, it seemed to be all right. I have no recollections of any problem with the roads.

DOCTER: So you came down, and he then assisted you in some way, perhaps introduced you--

DAHLSTROM: He wrote me a letter of recommendation, and I went out on my own and went from print shop to print shop.

DOCTER: Where did you go? What part of town? Do you remember whom you saw at that time?

DAHLSTROM: Well, there was Fletcher Ford, and there was Times-Mirror, and there was Young and McCallister, where I got a job--Bruce McCallister, a fairly well-known man, a fine printer. He was a friend of Nash's and patterned his style very much on Henry Nash.





DOCTER: Now, this would have been your first job hunting, outside of getting your original job there in Ogden. What did it feel like out on the streets, pounding the pavement, so to speak?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I didn't seem to be worried very much. I didn't have any money. I came down here with forty dollars in my pocket. That lasted-- That seemed to last well enough in July till I got a job about three weeks later.

DOCTER: Where did you stay?

DAHLSTROM: Stayed on a little street called Cherry Street just off Pico, west of Figueroa.

DOCTER: So, you would jump on a streetcar to get wherever you had to go?

DAHLSTROM: Uh-huh. I was there just a couple of weeks, first two or three weeks, until I got a job, and then I moved in with the family I knew, had a room with a family near the West Adams district, Raymond and Twenty-fourth Street, or something like that.

DOCTER: Well, that would have been a very fashionable area.

DAHLSTROM: This was the edge of the fashionable area. There were a lot of what you call flats or apartment houses.

DOCTER: Now, were the contacts you had through the Mormon church of any help in getting a job?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, no. There was nothing there. Nobody had



any contact with printing. There weren't quite as many Mormons down here then as there are now.

DOCTER: Do you recall the events of the day that you went to McCallister-- Was it McCallister and Young?

DAHLSTROM: Young and McCallister.

DOCTER: Young and McCallister. Can you recall the scene: what it was like to walk in, what it looked like, whom you talked with, what was said in getting that first job?

DAHLSTROM: Well, there wasn't very much to remember. I went in and asked for him, and he talked to me in his office. The building is still standing down there, Pico and Santee.

DOCTER: On the corner?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. It's kind of an English-type brick building, patterned on a farmhouse, I guess, with the half-timbering and so forth, brick.

DOCTER: Built for that company, was it?

DAHLSTROM: Uh-huh. And there was a two-story office section in the front. Well, two stories all the way through, because they had the bindery upstairs and the composition room and press room downstairs. So they had a pretty good-sized plant there, very good stuff. They had monotype and a good selection of type.

DOCTER: It was a major printing facility?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, it was one of the prominent places in town.

DOCTER: So, you asked to see the boss and had no trouble



getting in?

DAHLSTROM: No, no. So I went to work there. I thought I was going to be put in the composing room. Instead, he gave me an office with a desk, which was a surprise. And later on when the Depression got pretty bad, why, he put me down in charge of the composing room as composing room foreman.

DOCTER: Well, he started you on a pretty high status job!

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: On the grounds of the training you had and the design experience?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I brought some of the material I had done and showed it to him.

DOCTER: What kinds of things did you show him?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I showed some of the classwork I had done at Carnegie.

DOCTER: Different projects?

DAHLSTROM: And a lot of the shopwork that I'd done previously in the Scoville Press.

DOCTER: Then what would have been some of the first assignments that he gave you? Do you recall?

DAHLSTROM: Well, the first assignment was the title page of Warner's Ranch book [The History of Warner's Ranch and Its Environs]. The thing was on the press, and he'd left the design of the title page until the very last thing. And also the same thing for the Sunset Club book.



And the rest was a plumbing catalog for Elger, Elger Plumbing, manufacturers. A lot of material for the California Fruit Growers, including car cards. We did a lot of car card printing in those days.

DOCTER: All done letterpress?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, everything was letterpress. At that time, why, offset was used only in can labels, beer labels, and office forms, you know, bank checks and bank deposit forms, all that sort of thing. That was for the office end of it.

DOCTER: But he wasn't running any offset equipment at his shop at that time?

DAHLSTROM: No. Later, in a couple of years, why, he teamed up with an offset firm that came in.

DOCTER: What kind of a man was McCallister? How old would he have been when you met him?

DAHLSTROM: He was in his forties, I guess. He was a big man and very genial, very pleasant, quite handsome, had a nice family. He was one of the-- I don't know that he was a founding member, but he was a very early member of the Zamorano Club. He had been, in his youth-- He made his way out partway to California from Minnesota as a tramp printer. And there were tramp printers then. We got a lot of them. We had this fellow from Boston and a fellow from Aurora, the Elbert Hubbard press [Roycroft Press].





They would come through there and then move on. So tramp printers were not unusual then.

DOCTER: It would be men often without families?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Well, he came out here and landed in San Francisco on that great day in April of 1906. (Was it?)

DOCTER: On the day of the earthquake?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.



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DAHLSTROM: So he left very soon.

DOCTER: Arrived on the very day?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, and came down here. Worked for a printing business (I forgot the name of it). His boss died, his wife sold it to him and another man in their employ. The other guy was [Frederick A.] Young, so they changed the name to Young and McCallister. They were very good printers. The Depression did them in.

DOCTER: They had an operation that was geared to a certain cost level, I imagine, the rent and the equipment and the employees that it took to sustain the business.

DAHLSTROM: Well, their main competitor was Times-Mirror Company, whom I had contacted for a job. They offered me a job as a salesman, which I didn't regard myself as capable of holding.

DOCTER: Outside printing sales, making calls, bidding on jobs?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. [tape recorder off]

DOCTER: Now, let's pursue this chronologically, if we may, on through the 1930s. I guess as they started to lay people off there, you must have begun to wonder if they might lay you off.

DAHLSTROM: They did. I did land over not far from Young



and McCallister with a combination advertising and printing firm called the Mayers Company. It was run by three brothers. I left there to go at the end of that year-- I worked there from April to December, then I went to work for the Barker Brothers advertising department. There was not much creative work there. It was mostly specifications, getting ads all set in the various newspapers--there were five daily newspapers then--getting all the ads so that they looked exactly alike. Previous to that they'd been spending a lot of money on hand-setting those ads. They were trying to save money, cut down costs, so they hired me to do that.

DOCTER: Well, how did you prepare them?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I laid them out and marked specifications on each one. They had very good composing rooms in those days; I imagine they were certainly as good as they are now, if not better.

DOCTER: At the newspapers?

DAHLSTROM: At the newspapers. There was no charge then.

DOCTER: There wasn't?

DAHLSTROM: No, that's included in the cost of the whole ad. If you send in an ad already made up, send it to a newspaper now, the unions require that it has to be hand-set in there anyway.

DOCTER: Is that right?

DAHLSTROM: I didn't particularly like working for Barker Brothers. This was before the national wage price act,



NRA [National Recovery Act]. So when you had to work overtime, sometimes they would give you seventy-five cents for your evening meal and that's all.

DOCTER: Is that right?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. But if you took any time off, you were docked that time. You weren't given any credit. So I left there, went back to Mayers Company and then went back, after a few months there, to Young and McCallister.

DOCTER: I see. Now, Grant, on those ads for the newspapers, were those hand-set or set in Monotype or Linotype and then made into-- Tell us perhaps the process.

DAHLSTROM: You mean in the newspaper?

DOCTER: Yes.

DAHLSTROM: Well, they were set just on Linotypes, just as they still are, except for some of them are using pasteup now. Anyway, this is the same process that you find in any printshop, Linotype hand assembly.

DOCTER: You wouldn't have been responsible for preparing the mattes?

DAHLSTROM: The newspapers made the mattes in their own shop. You could have the ads set in one shop, and they would make two or three or four more mattes for you to send around to the others. And that was all included in the price of the space, the ad itself.

DOCTER: So, during the early thirties then there were many--





DAHLSTROM: This was 1929.

DOCTER: Oh, '29. All right.

DAHLSTROM: Began there the first of the year.

DOCTER: I see. Then finally back to Mayers and then back to McCallister. Business had picked up a little.

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Well, they had combined with three or four other businesses, related businesses of various sizes. The banks had put them back together. They all owed the banks money, so they were merged.

DOCTER: Whether they liked it or not.

DAHLSTROM: Right. Well, Young's partner had left sometime about that time and formed the Sterling Press; I think that name still is in use now. So, things got kind of bad, and in '35 or '36--'35, McCallister decided just to leave Young and McCallister entirely--he would have had to raise more capital--he just quit and went to work for the downtown Shopping News, which had a good-sized print shop, and I stayed there with him for five years.

DOCTER: You transferred with him?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Eight years, I was there eight years. Then when he left, they decided they didn't need me anymore, and I finally ended up in an advertising agency, Logan and Arnold.

DOCTER: Well, let's get these years down on tape, Grant. What was the year of the change?



DAHLSTROM: Forty-three.

DOCTER: Forty-three. You left McCallister, and he left the company, too, and went to the downtown Shopping News.

DAHLSTROM: No, that was in '35.

DOCTER: Oh, I'm sorry, all right. In 1935, the two of you left, went for eight years then to the downtown Shopping News, which had a big job-printing department, as I understand. They also published the downtown Shopping News, which was a pretty--

DAHLSTROM: Yes, which was a separate--

DOCTER: --pretty big paper.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, this was owned by the downtown merchants.

DOCTER: So in 1943, another change.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, I worked for a few months with an advertising agency, and then I had an opportunity to buy the Castle Press on very easy terms.

DOCTER: How did that happen, Grant? You were at the agency; were you looking for a shop to buy?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I was looking for something to do, and I did get a chance to buy this. It had been established and owned by a couple of fellows named "Rocky" Thomas--Roscoe Thomas--and House Olsen. House Olsen was a pretty good typographer but became an alcoholic, and the place just ran downhill. So I got it, not too cheaply, but for very little down. So I got that.



DOCTER: Could you tell us how it happened that you found out about the Castle Press. Was it an accident, or did you know these fellows? Through a business broker? How did it come to your attention?

DAHLSTROM: Well, sort of a grapevine. There was a young fellow that used to be at Mayers Company [whom] I kept contact with, named Joe Weston, who had heard about it. Two partners had split up, and they'd gone into war work. One of them still owned it, and there were just two people working in the shop then. So I had to take hold and build it up from a gross of \$700 a month and get people during wartime, which-- Everybody was frozen on his job; it was a hell of a job to get anyone to come to work for you. So, in a few months I had it going pretty well.

DOCTER: It was only grossing [\$]700 at that time? That wouldn't be enough to--

DAHLSTROM: There were two people in it. One of them was so deaf that he got paranoid: he thought everybody was making fun of him.

DOCTER: Did they stay to help you?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: What equipment did you buy at that time when you took over ownership?

DAHLSTROM: There was a little Chandler and Price jobber.



DOCTER: Do you remember what size?

DAHLSTROM: Fifteen inch.

DOCTER: Ten by fifteen.

DAHLSTROM: Two Miehle Verticals.

DOCTER: Two?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. And then the fellow that owned the building was Scott Hazelton, who ran a small publishing business about cactus and succulents. He had a twenty-two-by-thirty-four hand-fed Miehle cylinder, and he owned the Intertype machine there, which I could use at a very nominal price. I was paying a very low rent, too, which made it very easy for me all the way along.

By the way, just as I was quitting my job and was about to take over, I was taken to the hospital for an emergency radical mastoidectomy. So I was kind of bandaged up when I got out of the hospital about five weeks later and went to take over the business. So there was a little hitch in the beginning there.

But I had very good response from people I knew. I got a lot of business from people I knew in downtown Los Angeles. Don Hill, who had been my old boss at Barker Brothers, gave me a lot of work. And the agency that I worked for, they gave me work from many of their accounts, including Joyce Shoe Company, which was just two blocks from my new shop.





As it turned out, Pasadena's never been a particularly good town for me. Huntington Library's good, but that's out of the city limits. I used to do a lot of work for Caltech. It turned out to be pretty good, in spite of the difficulties.

DOCTER: How much type did you have in '43 when you took over the Castle Press?

DAHLSTROM: They had a pretty good selection of type for that time. It was a little worn. About the only type we did have in a complete series was Garamond. I had that on the Linotype; I had it in the cases. But when the war was over and things loosened up and you could get things, buy stuff again, I brought in a lot of good stuff. Later, in the fifties, the German types started to come over, and that's when you could get good types.

DOCTER: Stempel type foundry [Frankfurt].

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: But ATF was still offering a wider variety of types up until about when?

DAHLSTROM: In the fifties.

DOCTER: Mid-fifties, as I recall.

DAHLSTROM: But European types were much better, and American Type Founders was run by financial people who didn't really understand the business, so they couldn't meet the competition.



DOCTER: Right. Now, the decision to come to Pasadena was based entirely on the fact that the shop was here. Had you ever given thoughts to moving it elsewhere? Of course, you wouldn't want to now, but I mean at the time, was it--

DAHLSTROM: Well, no serious thoughts, no.

DOCTER: You moved to Pasadena at that time.

DAHLSTROM: No, I moved-- You mean my residence?

DOCTER: Yes.

DAHLSTROM: No, I moved over to Eagle Rock. It was during the war; it was hard to find a place to live, too, as well as everything else. So we moved over onto Yosemite Drive, across from the high school, lived there six years, and at the end of that time we felt we were able to build a house in Pasadena. We've been there ever since.

DOCTER: Well, in '43, for the first time, you became owner and manager of a business. Were you a good businessman?

DAHLSTROM: I don't think so. I'm not much of a businessman.

DOCTER: Even now?

DAHLSTROM: Even now. The whole thing is just keeping people busy and keeping track of what it costs and billing-- billing at a profit. That's about all I know of the business end of it.

DOCTER: As you look back sort of from the standpoint of being a manager, the operating head of an organization in which people are obviously a big part, what are some of the



things that you look back on as some of the basic ideas that you've learned along the line in managing? Anything in particular that stands out?

DAHLSTROM: Well, mostly to keep decent relations with the people who work for you, to appreciate what they do for you as long as they're doing it.

DOCTER: Beginning in '43, you had only two employees and gradually brought in more. What was the peak number, in terms of the number of individuals that you were working with?

DAHLSTROM: The peak number was just about the same, you know, give or take a couple.

DOCTER: About eight people?

DAHLSTROM: Yes, eight to ten people.

DOCTER: And physically, has the operation--of course, the equipment has changed, but in terms of the size and location and this kind of thing--has that been--

DAHLSTROM: It's about the same.

DOCTER: About the same?

DAHLSTROM: Let's see, I had about 3,500 square feet at the other place, and I've got about 4,800 here.

DOCTER: What happened to some of your competitors in 1943, other job shops? Have they withered on the vine, or have they merged?

DAHLSTROM: You mean in Pasadena?



DOCTER: Yes, some of your local competitors.

DAHLSTROM: Oh, ownership has changed. Typecraft, which has got my old building now and owns most of that block, was the job shop part of the old ownership of the Star newspaper. They've grown quite a bit; they print telephone books and so on and so forth. But I've never attempted to go beyond what I could handle by being in on everything that went through the shop, design and everything, except, of course, what comes in already designed.

DOCTER: In the early days, were you doing any of the hand composition yourself or any of the presswork yourself?

DAHLSTROM: No. No, actually I'm not a pressman, I couldn't. I could put a job on a platen, but I'm not a pressman at all, really.

DOCTER: I never have actually worked year after year--

DAHLSTROM: I can set type, and I've had to step in to do a little typesetting once in a while, but [there was] too much interruption--telephones, people coming in--so that it was not economical for me to attempt to work in the shop.

DOCTER: Right. So your responsibility from '43, even from the first day, was the internal management and control--

DAHLSTROM: And salesmanship.

DOCTER: --and getting the business and keeping the business and helping to interpret to the customer, I guess, what





the possible approaches were.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, right.

DOCTER: Now, that's changed dramatically, hasn't it, with new technology, with offset and so on, since '43. Just in thirty years? Haven't you had to learn a whole new business?

DAHLSTROM: No, I put that up to the people in the shop. Of course, I knew something about offset. The other places I've worked--in Ogden they had an offset department. It's changed tremendously since then; the camera is the big changing force in offset. So that's just a technical thing; it doesn't change your approach to it at all. You know what you can do, and you can do more things, but it's a simple change; it's the camera and the development of film, the way you make your halftones. The halftones used to be pretty flat, dull. Nobody liked the offset halftone for a long time.

DOCTER: That's one of the main things that held offset back, isn't it?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: They just weren't able to get the high contrast.

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: Well, now, during the thirty-two-odd years that you've operated the Castle Press, have you made any big mistakes in terms of the equipment that you've brought in?



Have there been any periods of near disaster because of the changing technology, for example?

DAHLSTROM: Well, you couldn't call it a mistake to go into offset. There was a period there of trying to get capable help, because the offset end of it was expanding so rapidly; it was very difficult to get good offset operators. And there were times there when I had a succession of pressmen that were worthless, and that was quite tough.

DOCTER: When did offset really come into its own in terms of your buying equipment and having to make changes?

DAHLSTROM: In the fifties.

DOCTER: Late fifties?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: Maybe '57, '58, along in there?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Yes, it was about then that I got my first offset press.

DOCTER: What do you do when you have an employee who isn't working out? How do you get rid of him?

DAHLSTROM: We just tell him he's not needed anymore, and we give him what he has coming to him in vacation money, and then he goes. The sad thing is that they're used to it, and it happens to them all the time. We give every man a chance in here, and if he can't do it, he can't do it. And if he's been through this business of being hired



and fired continuously for a long time, it doesn't bother him too much. They get angry, but--

DOCTER: Something that you come to feel easier with after it's happened a few times.

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: The present group that you have, for example: how long would these individuals have been employed here at the Castle Press? Is it a stable group?

DAHLSTROM: It's quite stable. Well, I have Jesse Bravo, who's foreman of the pressroom. He's been with me for thirty years.

DOCTER: Thirty years!

DAHLSTROM: But he's getting anxious to leave. He just doesn't have the stamina anymore; it's a hard job, you know, being on your feet all day long.

DOCTER: Yes.

DAHLSTROM: And the girl we had at the desk there, she retired on her own volition about three months ago. And I had a young fellow, Bob Hirano, who was with me a long time, but three years ago when we had that little depression there for a while, I had to cut way down. I had to take over his duties.

DOCTER: What became of Bob?

DAHLSTROM: He is now up in Oakland, and as far as I know, he's doing very well. He's working for a business



forms company, a quite different business from what we've got here.

DOCTER: Has Mrs. Dahlstrom had any business or printing experience along the way?

DAHLSTROM: Well, when we first opened, she worked along with me. But we had a daughter of about fourteen, and she needed to have her mother at home.

DOCTER: Did you just have the one child?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. She worked with me for about a year or so, and it was kind of a hard job for her to run a house and take care of an adolescent.

DOCTER: Well, I take it that you were able to pull the business together almost from the first and make a go of it.

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Well, the first month that I was on it, we grossed [\$]700; the second month it was 8, and 9, and the month following was \$1200; so I was able to get it going. And those first few months were with those two original employees plus someone in the office.

DAHLSTROM: Has your daughter had any interest at all in printing or design?

DAHLSTROM: No, nor my grandson. I gave him a job here when he was in high school, and he was quite bored.

DOCTER: It really didn't take.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, he was interested in football. Still is. He thinks he's going to be a coach.





DOCTER: Is that right? Good.

DAHLSTROM: Well, it's kind of hard on him; he busted his knee in a rugby match in January and was laid up for a couple of months. Athletics is just no place for anybody as far as I can see.

DOCTER: It's a lot rougher than printing [laughter], there's no doubt about that.

Well, I suggest that we sign off for the moment and take another swing at this. Perhaps we can look at some other aspects of your approach to design, some of your thoughts about typography and printing and about some of the people whom you've known in the field, in addition to those we've talked to more with a historical perspective, next week.

Sound OK?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: Good.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

MAY 13, 1975

DOCTER: Let's talk a little bit about your own political and social outlook.

DAHLSTROM: Well, actually, I don't see much of a connection there between that and what my work turned out to be.

DOCTER: I see. They're not really on the same track. They're separate topics.

DAHLSTROM: Separate, and I don't see how one influenced the other.

DOCTER: I see. Well, let's start with something that deals more directly with printing.

DAHLSTROM: OK.

DOCTER: For example, in your own high school, I'm not clear whether there was a print shop that was--

DAHLSTROM: No.

DOCTER: There was none.

DAHLSTROM: No, there were no trade classes, shop classes as such, in my school at the time, except the manual training class, which was cabinetmaking and carpentry.

DOCTER: I see. Where then did you first set type?

DAHLSTROM: At the Scoville Press in Ogden. I worked in the office to begin with for about a year, and then I went up into the composing room and set type there and had training from these three people that I mentioned earlier.



DOCTER: They gave you what amounted to an on-the-job experience there.

DAHLSTROM: Yes. No training in design actually, but in just the trade of typesetting.

DOCTER: How much type could you set in a day? Were you a fast compositor?

DAHLSTROM: Well, this had machine composition in the shop. It had Monotype, so that there was no hand setting of that sort. It wasn't that long ago.

DOCTER: Well, it was about fifty years ago--sixty.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, but we had Linotypes about a hundred years ago.

DOCTER: Right. So you would only have been setting, perhaps, headlines.

DAHLSTROM: Oh, yes, display. Everything else came off of the Monotype machine.

DOCTER: You'd prepare the tape that went into the Monotype machine?

DAHLSTROM: No, no the operator did both keyboard and casting. It was just a one-man department.

DOCTER: Where would you acquire the supplies for the Monotype? Directly from England or here in this country?

DAHLSTROM: No, from the Langston Monotype people in Philadelphia.

DOCTER: I see. Do you recall what faces Scoville used



the most?

DAHLSTROM: Caslon, Caslon Oldstyle, and what was called a Modern, which was one of those spidery, late nineteenth-century faces. That was all that he had on his machine.

DOCTER: Did they do any composition for other shops?

DAHLSTROM: No. No, the other shops had Linotypes. One shop had a Linograph, but that's all.

DOCTER: That's the older machine, isn't it?

DAHLSTROM: That's the good machine that was bought out and junked by Mergenthaler Company.

DOCTER: Could you say just a word or two about that, because I don't understand the history of that. What happened there?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I don't know very much about that, except just generally speaking. At that time and before that time, there was a great deal of activity in line-casting machines as well as the Monotype. Monotype was just about coeval with the Linotype getting on the market. And so Mergenthaler and Intertype were the two companies that finally emerged by buying up all their competitors. Now, you've gotten a little of that history in Lindner's catalog of old printing equipment. But I'm not an authority on that. I just have a vague notion of what went on.

DOCTER: Now, you were not doing any press work at Scoville, as I understand it.





DAHLSTROM: No, I stayed in the composing room with the view of being a designer.

DOCTER: Right, from the beginning. And in that sense, you're one man who has been able to actually enjoy a career pretty much as you laid it out for yourself.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, in a way. I started out in a commercial job shop; continued; all the other plants that I worked in were commercial job shops, in which they took in any sort of a print job that came in. There was no specialization in any of the shops, except there was a sort of specialization in the quality of work.

DOCTER: When you went to Pittsburgh, at Carnegie Tech, did you there operate various presses?

DAHLSTROM: The only press I operated was a little--well, not a little one, but about an eighteen-inch--Chandler and Price. But it was a very permissive place, the shop was. You were instructed in theory of the operation of all the equipment there, especially the Linotype. There was an old Number One Linotype I learned to operate--and have well forgotten since then. Most of the time spent in the shop was on little trifling projects of my own; there were no set projects.

DOCTER: Do you recall some of those projects?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, Christmas cards and letterheads, that sort of thing. I entered a couple of letterhead design contests



put on by--one was by the Miller Printing Machinery Company. I came in second for their letterhead. No, not a letterhead, it was a design for the name plaque on the Miller press. But there were very few definite projects instituted by the class itself.

DOCTER: Well, how much supervision and direction did they give you in the training program there at the laboratory press?

DAHLSTROM: Not in the shop particularly. On the Linotype and the Monotype machines, to operate those; they had a little more emphasis on those things than on press work.

DOCTER: How much training in design?

DAHLSTROM: There was a class in design for first-year-- I was there just one year--first-year students. [Homer] Sterling was the instructor, the first man they ever had there. They had another man; I've forgotten whether he was in charge of the types, of the composition instruction or not. But he was the brother of Edmund G. Gress, who was the editor of the design section of American Printer. They were quite close, and they worked together a lot. There was a lecture course on the history of printing by Porter Garnett; it was open to first-year students. There was a lettering course by Porter Garnett.

DOCTER: This would have been all kinds of lettering, or calligraphic, work?



DAHLSTROM: No, this was lettering, there was no calligraphy as such; no attention was paid to calligraphy, not even as the source of type design.

DOCTER: I see. Now, in what sense did you find the year fulfilling and valuable, and what disappointments did you have? This was one of the major training experiences that you'd had, wasn't it?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: How would you evaluate it?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I would say that the trouble was that I came into it a little late. I should have gone there much earlier in my printing experience. As a matter of fact, I had read a lot and examined a lot of reproductions of printed designs up to that time, so that I knew a great deal more than anybody in any of the classes in that respect. I didn't know anything about theory, and the instructors I thought were a little short on theory, too, because I seemed to know as much as they did. I think that was mainly why I didn't go back. But I was also quite short of money, so I didn't see my way clear to go back.

DOCTER: Perhaps if it had been an outstanding program, some way might have been found.

DAHLSTROM: Possibly so, but I was-- I had learned a lot of things that they were going over again as far as I was concerned. They were just repeating.



DOCTER: Did the possibility of going to any other part of the United States cross your mind at all?

DAHLSTROM: No. No, the only possibility that did cross my mind was going back to Sweden with Bror Zachrisson, who was a classmate and who later in Sweden founded the Grafiska Institutet, which was quite a performance. This institute was backed up by the printing industry in Sweden and became quite a potent thing.

DOCTER: What kind of a person was he?

DAHLSTROM: Well, at that time he sort of patterned himself after P. G. Wodehouse's character, Bertie Wooster. He was a great deal of fun to be with. But he was a good scholar besides that. Years later, when I met him again--he came out here about ten years ago--he'd changed a great deal. The Scandinavian environment made him quite dignified and quite severe, none of the gaiety of his youth. But he had accomplished quite a bit in the graphic arts and still is a big name in Sweden--and in Europe, too. But that's the only time I've ever thought of going any other place, mostly due to lack of money. I didn't have any capital to put myself in another town or city.

DOCTER: How much money did you have when you went to Pittsburgh?

DAHLSTROM: I had \$150.

DOCTER: And how did you get through the year?





DAHLSTROM: Well, I worked a little while in the print shop of the Kaufman Department Store during a rush period, which was around Christmastime. Then I got a job as a busboy in a restaurant over in the suburb called Liberty, where I got my dinner and twenty-five cents every time I went there.

DOCTER: For how much work?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, about three hours' work, three to four hours' work.

DOCTER: How well did you eat?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I ate everything in sight. It was a nice family restaurant; had good food there.

DOCTER: Are you a man that worries about money?

DAHLSTROM: Uh-huh. Yes, I worry about it as long as I don't have it. There didn't seem to be any possibility of extending myself any further. There was no money available. There were no scholarships at that time. But tuition was quite low and living costs were quite low. But I never went back.

DOCTER: At that time, you were how old?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I turned twenty-five when I was there at Pittsburgh.

DOCTER: Had you any thoughts one way or the other about possibly going into a college program?

DAHLSTROM: No.

DOCTER: That was never part of the scene?

DAHLSTROM: You mean instruction? Education? No.



DOCTER: Or being a teacher of printing, anything of that kind?

DAHLSTROM: No, that didn't occur to me at all. I was interested in the actual production of printing.

DOCTER: So then at the age of about twenty-six, you were back in Salt Lake, and as you told us--

DAHLSTROM: Well, I had turned twenty-five in the January in the middle of my year at Pittsburgh.

DOCTER: Right. And then back to Salt Lake and on to Los Angeles.

DAHLSTROM: Well, it was Ogden. I wasn't based in Salt Lake.

DOCTER: Oh, I'm sorry. In Ogden.

DAHLSTROM: And I was there a couple of months and then came down here in August. The first job that was offered to me down here was the Times-Mirror, or did I say this?

DOCTER: I think you did.

DAHLSTROM: I was offered a job as a printing salesman, which I didn't feel fitted for.

DOCTER: Why not?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I had been trying to sell up in Ogden the summer that I came down and with no success, primarily because there was no market, really. So that didn't appeal to me.

That's what McCallister, Bruce McCallister, was: he was a printing salesman, although he had had a great



deal of experience working printing shops. He had been a tramp printer, that is, he'd gone from town to town for a period. But he was a salesman who came to-- That was his approach to printing--sales.

DOCTER: In the late twenties and early thirties, did you meet many men connected with printing who you stayed in touch with over the years? How early, for example, did you meet men like Jake Zeitlin, Ward Ritchie, and so on?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I met Jake and Ward in '28, '29. I guess it was in 1929. I knew Jake when he opened his first store, which was a little room about as big as this office, but with a much lower ceiling. There was clearance for a six-foot man in this little room.

DOCTER: It was that small?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: What was the location?

DAHLSTROM: It was in a building on Hope Street across from the Bible Institute. Well, actually, it was where the California Club is, and it was torn down for that club. I guess Bruce McCallister, whom I worked for, and Jake, who was not a printer, and Ward, who was becoming a printer, and Gregg Anderson I met about that time. That's about all the printers I knew. I met Fred Lang once and talked to him a little bit--that was some time later--and he was a



very good printer (I didn't realize it at the time).

But most of my influence or most of the influence that came to me was what I saw in books and imitated--mostly English printers, like Francis Meynell, and the university presses.

DOCTER: What would be generally called fine book work.

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: Very classical tradition.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, the English style of the thirties. And, of course, I was influenced a great deal by the amount and the kind of work that I had to do in the course of the printing day, which was advertising material--a lot of material for California Fruit Growers.

DOCTER: What would be an example of a typical job or two that you might have gotten out?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I designed streetcar cards for California Fruit Growers, designed them and I executed the artwork.

DOCTER: Well, could you say just what you meant by that, Grant? When you say, "executed the artwork," what would you have done?

DAHLSTROM: Well, not really the artwork. It was mostly specifications, and I worked with the artists in Young and McCallister. They had a couple of advertising artists there. Well, they ran a sort of advertising agency in connection with the printing business. They had writers, and it was all direct mail; they didn't design or do





anything in terms of media advertising. This was mostly printed material that went out to restaurant operators and other people who used oranges and other citrus. It was designed to promote the use of Sunkist oranges and lemons. So, there were recipes and all kinds of other materials to show them how to do it. There were writers, there were advertising men who prepared the stuff, and I designed the typographic style.

DOCTER: Do you recall the first time you met Jake Zeitlin?

DAHLSTROM: Well, that was a long time ago, and I've seen him so many times. I think it was that he came in to the Mayers Company. He had a book, a little pamphlet written by Merle Armitage, that he wanted printed. I don't know what the use of it was, but anyway it was printed on handmade paper and bound in black paper, black Fabriano, and it was a typical Armitage effusion. It was illustrated by Grace Marion Brown, who was a very talented woman, [an] illustrator in Los Angeles at that time. And it was done in the modern style of that time. It came out from Europe. It was all set in Bodoni Bold, widely leaded, and there was a great deal of contrast in black and white. It's a very curious-looking object now. That's the first time I met him. He didn't even have his shop by then.

DOCTER: He didn't?

DAHLSTROM: He was working out of a briefcase.



DOCTER: What was he like?

DAHLSTROM: Pretty much as he is now, except a lot younger. [laughter] No, he's remained true to type. There's no--no, no change in Jake.

DOCTER: What is it that makes Jake a little different than a lot of booksellers?

DAHLSTROM: Well, he's interested in literature, in history, and he's interested in books in depth, not so much as a business. He turned out to be a pretty good businessman, that is, he went the hard way. He didn't make much money. In fact, I think he did go through bankruptcy at one time. But he kept at it, and he's always been a good bookman. It was in his shop I got most of the books on printing and about printing that I studied and modeled my style on, whatever it is. But he had Nonesuch [Press], he had Gregynog [Press], he had Golden Cockerel [Press], all the wonderful stuff of that sort. And he would have little seminars, little lectures by various people after hours in his shop; crowd in a dozen or so people there, and they could listen to somebody talk about printing, mostly--books.

DOCTER: Is that kind of meeting, that informal get-together, a thing of the past, or is it just passed on to different locations and different groups?

DAHLSTROM: Well, it is a thing of the past, because everything was a little more compact in Los Angeles then.



Downtown Los Angeles was a place of a real social life, too, as well as business. People lived within a few minutes on the streetcar of downtown. That was the life of Los Angeles, right there around Sixth and Seventh and Fifth.

DOCTER: Where were you living at the time?

DAHLSTROM: I was living out on Twenty-ninth Place near Arlington.

DOCTER: Not far from the Clark Library.

DAHLSTROM: Not far from the Clark Library, no. I passed that quite often without knowing what it was.

DOCTER: Did the senior Mr. Dawson ever attend the Zeitlin seminars?

DAHLSTROM: No. No, I didn't meet any Dawsons until many years later. I was a little overawed by the Dawson shop. I would venture in there, but I never bought anything.

It was quite a busy place; there were a lot of people there. It really overawed me. I didn't know that I really belonged in anything like that, quite so grand.

DOCTER: High-class.

DAHLSTROM: High-class and big.

DOCTER: Would you say that Zeitlin is a pretty friendly fellow? Has this been one of the ingredients that's made him a magnet?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, yes. He has a great social sense, social manner. He can talk to anybody on any level on any subject that interests the other person. He's always got something



in his own experience or store of knowledge that he can relate, he can relate to his opposite number that he's talking to.

DOCTER: When did you first meet Ward, Ward Ritchie?

DAHLSTROM: I met him in about '29 in Jake's shop. He was quite busy in the Two Maggots Press and--oh, he had a couple of imprint names. He and Gregg [Anderson], Gordon Newell, and Roland Baughman-- But I didn't get into any of his activities, except after the Rounce & Coffin Club, the organization. He had a dinner meeting at his house in South Pasadena, and so I began to know Ward then. This was after he had been to Paris and studied under [François-Louis] Schmied, worked under Schmied.

DOCTER: How about Gregg Anderson?

DAHLSTROM: I didn't know Gregg very much except in the Rounce & Coffin Club. He was quite a reserved person, and so I didn't get to know him very much. I tried to cultivate him, but he was quite reserved.

DOCTER: In many ways different from Ward.

DAHLSTROM: Oh, yes. He was much more serious as a printer. In fact, he went back east and worked in Meriden Gravure Company. He tried to get into the Merrymount Press shop, but Mr. [Daniel Berkeley] Updike was very hard to get interested in anybody else but the ones that he had in the place. He wasn't ready to take anybody in just to train them.





He was a very good businessman.

And then [Anderson] came back out here. He ran the Anderson, Ritchie [Press] during the war up until he entered the war himself. He was not so interested in fine printing as running a good solid shop like-- Well, he patterned it much after Merrymount Press.

DOCTER: In making it a quality shop but also a commercial success?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: How good a businessman is Ward?

DAHLSTROM: I think Ward is a very good businessman. I think he's done a very good job in that respect, as well as in design of books and printing. He's a very well-rounded printer.

DOCTER: When did you first meet Saul Marks?

DAHLSTROM: Well, he came in to see McCallister about something, a job or something. I met him then; he was introduced to me. I'm a little hazy about the circumstances. But we found a lot to talk about, about printing. He had been working in typographic shops, setting advertising; he was very skillful at it. But there wasn't enough depth to what he was doing to interest him. So he is an example of the most thoroughly self-taught fine printer I know. He taught himself to run the Monotype machine, the Linotype machine, all kinds of printing presses. He taught



himself lithography; he taught himself photography; stripping in in lithography. I don't know of a thing that he knew that he didn't teach himself to do. A natural-born printer.

DOCTER: How well did you know Saul?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, I saw quite a bit of him until about '33 or '34. In fact, I was a sort of a silent partner in the first year or so that he had the Plantin Press; and there were pretty tough times then.

DOCTER: What was the arrangement?

DAHLSTROM: Well, there was his other partner, [Kenneth] McKay, there was Saul, there was me; I had a job with Bruce McCallister, but I was there just to sort of nurse along things and be sort of a consultant, work a little bit weekends. But we broke up, and for some time after that I didn't see him. I came over here in '43, so I didn't see him for quite a while after that.

DOCTER: Who was McKay?

DAHLSTROM: He was a friend of his that had a little money and supplied the capital for beginning the Plantin Press.

DOCTER: Do you recall how much money was invested?

DAHLSTROM: No. No, I don't. I think it was a couple of thousand dollars.

DOCTER: What would Saul have bought with that? Or how was that initial capital used?

DAHLSTROM: Well, there was some equipment. There was a Colt's



Armory press. Then there was mostly type, which Saul cast himself in one of the typographic shops. He rented their equipment and cast his own type there for equipping the shop.

DOCTER: What was Saul like personally to work with?

DAHLSTROM: Well, he had periods in which he would all unexpectedly just blow up with such force that everybody around him was absolutely devastated. He worked under such heavy tension, driving himself so hard, that he just had to blow it off.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

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DOCTER: Well, Grant, you were just saying that there were times when Saul Marks would just sort of have to blow off steam, and, to everybody's surprise, he would apparently get pretty angry. Do you recall any particular scene? Could you tell us just the kind of thing that would happen?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, I don't remember any of those, except-- No, I don't remember any particular scene. I do know that he was under such great tension, all the time driving himself, that if people didn't seem to move along fast enough to suit him, he just couldn't hold it. But as the years went by, when he began to be recognized and got the fruits of all his labors coming in, why, he naturally relaxed quite a bit; much, much easier to deal with.

DOCTER: How good a businessman was Saul?

DAHLSTROM: Saul was not a businessman. He depended on Lillian for that, near as I can tell. He was continually buying equipment, and that's rather expensive. So he was in hock to the equipment dealers for a long time. One thing that got him out of that was Beatrice Warde's taking him under her wing and getting him the very fine Monotype equipment. I don't know what the details of that are or not, but it was a great help to him.





DOCTER: When was that?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, that was back in the sixties. But I was not close to him then. I was in contact with him a great deal but not as close as I had been in the beginning.

DOCTER: In the first year of the Plantin Press, would it be fair to say that there was a partnership, or what was the arrangement?

DAHLSTROM: There was a partnership. And it was mostly to provide capital; my contribution capital came out of my rather small salary, which was dipped into. This was in the thirties, you see, when everybody had been-- Well, they'd started out-- I started out at McCallister at the munificent salary of sixty-five dollars a week. That is, I got up to sixty-five dollars, and that was all of a sudden. When things went bad, it was reduced 10 percent, then it went down to another 10 percent, so that although it was happening to everybody, it was still not very much money. Prices were way down. Living prices were way down. So all the capital I was able to put into it didn't amount to much. I think it was under five hundred dollars.

DOCTER: At that time, though, five hundred would certainly buy a lot of type, wouldn't it?

DAHLSTROM: Uh-huh.

DOCTER: A great deal--or paper.

DAHLSTROM: Or living expenses--Saul had to live out of it.



And there was considerable time there before there was any real money coming in.

DOCTER: How did the Plantin Press partnership get organized? Who pushed it? Who organized it? Who did the negotiating?

DAHLSTROM: Saul and his friend McKay. They were living in the same apartment house, became friends that way, and McKay, who was an accountant, became interested. So that's how it all came about.

DOCTER: Prior to that time, Saul did not have his own shop?

DAHLSTROM: Right. The last shop that he worked for was Murray Printing Company. I think they're still in business.

DOCTER: Did he leave there, or did they have to lay him off?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, he left there.

DOCTER: Then you were actually one of the founders of the Plantin Press.

DAHLSTROM: Yes, yes, in a way, yes.

DOCTER: Was there a written partnership agreement?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: And then how did it happen to break up?

DAHLSTROM: Well [interruption]. Just a second.

DOCTER: Let's just turn this off a second here. [tape recorder turned off]

Grant, we were just talking about the beginnings of the Plantin Press and about what happened then during the first year. It was a slow start, and then what happened?



DAHLSTROM: Well, I had to spend the summer at a very low rate at the McCallister press. So I couldn't contribute any more, and so we broke up on that account.

DOCTER: Were you expected to put money in regularly?

DAHLSTROM: Well, in a partnership you're supposed to share in the losses as well as the profits, and it was all losses then.

DOCTER: Oh, they needed additional money?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, yes. Saul needed living expenses.

DOCTER: What were the steps that were taken then? Did you simply get together and talk it over, or do you recall the details?

DAHLSTROM: No, I don't. It just broke up on general consent.

DOCTER: What happened to McKay?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, he stayed on. He stayed on until-- I guess it was the late fifties or the early sixties, he was still there.

DOCTER: As an investor?

DAHLSTROM: No, he worked with Saul. He worked right in the shop.

DOCTER: As a printer?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Though as far as that goes, I think you'd better ask Lillian about that, because I was quite out of it.

DOCTER: How about Will Cheney? You had some early influence



on Will Cheney, didn't you?

DAHLSTROM: I don't know about influence. He came and worked in the shop on a book I did for the Sacramento Book Club. He made up the type, and he was there about a month or six weeks during one summer.

DOCTER: What kind of a worker was he?

DAHLSTROM: Well, he was, as you'd expect, a very leisurely worker, a very thoughtful worker.

DOCTER: Are there any recollections that you have about Will being around the shop at that time?

DAHLSTROM: Well, it was a very short period, just a few weeks. We set him up in one corner of the composing room to work on this book. When that was finished, why, he decided to leave and go back to his own-- Well, it was quite a trip over there anyway. And he did work for Saul for a while with about the same results. No, Will is an individual, and he's always worked best alone, I guess. And he wasn't particularly interested in working as part of an organization anyway.

DOCTER: You commented that Ward Ritchie had called some people together at his home to organize Rounce & Coffin.

DAHLSTROM: No, no. Arthur Ellis was the one that instigated Rounce & Coffin, and he called two or three people together (I've forgotten just where it was.) Ward and me and Gregg--I guess that's all there were at the first meeting.





DOCTER: Was [Lawrence Clark] Powell at the first meeting?

DAHLSTROM: No, Powell didn't come in till we started taking librarians in. Previous to that, it was all printers.

DOCTER: So you recall four people being present.

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: And then I believe at the second meeting Saul Marks was included.

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: Who suggested inviting Saul?

DAHLSTROM: I think I did. I think I was the one that knew him more than anybody else.

DOCTER: Did the others know him at all?

DAHLSTROM: Uh-huh.

DOCTER: Was Zeitlin in on it at the time?

DAHLSTROM: I'm a little hazy on that. I don't know whether Zeitlin came in after Saul or not. I guess it was.

DOCTER: What were the original purposes of Rounce & Coffin? What did Ellis have in mind?

DAHLSTROM: Primarily a printers' club, printers who were interested in printing from the point of view of aesthetics, not in scholarship. And then the membership was broadened to people who were interested in printing, such as librarians. It was Powell who was particularly active in opening the membership to-- Well, it was a good way to give some training to his staff, for instance. A great many of



the members of the UCLA library staff were brought in, and they're still in there. That's how [Richard] Archer came in and became a very good, active member, one of the best members, best secretaries we ever had.

DOCTER: And a printer.

DAHLSTROM: Well, he was sort of forced into that. The club got together and bought him some type and a little Pilot press, I think it was, or a Kelsey. I think Muir [Dawson] was the one that promoted that. And it was presented to him at his house out in southwest Los Angeles--what was that?--oh, it was on Santa Barbara Street or thereabouts. And I remember he was a little bit taken aback at this new responsibility of being a printer. But he was game; he went through with it. He was a little hesitant about the whole thing to begin with. And now he has quite a bit of equipment set up in his shop, in his basement at Williamstown. And he teaches classes, and part of their instruction is in his little basement shop.

DOCTER: When you first met Powell, that would have been in the thirties, I guess. What was he like at that time?

DAHLSTROM: Well, first time I met him, he was just fresh from France, and I think he was physically a little beat when he got back. I don't think he was in financial straits or anything, because he was dressed up like a version of D. H. Lawrence, looked a lot like him. He was



very sharp and not very happy about coming back to the United States, I guess. It happened to be, not a Rounce & Coffin meeting, but Ward's sketch club, Ward's club that met in his house, and Delmer Daves had the club to a dinner at his house, and that's where I met Powell. He seemed to be pretty depressed and melancholy, didn't enjoy the meeting or anything.

DOCTER: Is he a person who tends to get pretty down at times?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, I don't think so. I don't think that's true. It was just that he was not very happy, and I don't think he was very well at the time, not very happy about coming back to California.

DOCTER: I see. What accounts for Powell's exceptional success?

DAHLSTROM: I couldn't say. I couldn't say. I was never very close to Powell; my acquaintance with him was not at all intimate.

DOCTER: Did you do much printing for him?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I did one or two things for him when he was having his broadsides. I did a Christmas greeting for him once.

DOCTER: Are there any Los Angeles printers, fine printers, whom we have completely missed mentioning?

DAHLSTROM: Not that I can think of.



DOCTER: We mentioned McCallister, Ellis, Ward Ritchie, certainly yourself, Saul Marks--

DAHLSTROM: Gregg Anderson.

DOCTER: Gregg Anderson, Will Cheney. If there are any that come to mind, let's be sure to bring them up.

Could we turn to the San Francisco scene? Who do you think are the most memorable San Francisco-based fine printers of the last twenty-five years or so?

DAHLSTROM: Well, that's pretty well known. I've never gotten up into San Francisco very much. I didn't know these people up there very well; it was mostly people who came down here. This is where I met them.

Adrian Wilson I did meet up there when he was in partnership with [Jack] Stauffacher, just when he was starting out; it was in '47. I met him and Stauffacher when Nell and I were up with the Archers, and we had lunch at Tadich's with Stauffacher and Adrian. We went up into their little cubbyhole.

But I never travelled up to San Francisco very much, so I didn't meet very many of them. Those that I met I didn't know very well.

DOCTER: Well, obviously the biggest names would be, I suppose, Lawton Kennedy and the Grabhorns [Edwin and Robert] as well as Adrian Wilson.

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Stauffacher, Everson--I met [William]





Everson at that time. He was printing in the back room of a Maybeck house that he and his girlfriend lived in.

DOCTER: This is Brother Antoninus?

DAHLSTROM: Oh, this was long before that. His girl at that time--what was her name? Anyway, she wanted to get married, or the Catholic priests went to work on her and on Everson. Finally, the Church had its effect. But it didn't result in his marrying the girl, which was her idea; he became a lay brother. He went into a seminary and then became a lay brother. For a long time [he] went around in a robe. But when I met him up there he was working on a handpress on his first book; and it was really a great pleasure to watch him, how he printed. Having had no contact with a mechanized print shop, he was just free to do it properly. Every sheet that was printed was a thing in itself, an individual, an individual sheet. And he printed these. He kept a steady routine on it. But it was not initiated by a machine, anywhere near. And it was a great pleasure to see him working in his print shop with a couple of silver-plated candlesticks with candles under the printing stone, the inking stone. It was a cold room--it was in San Francisco, of course--and there was no heat there; so to keep the ink workable, he had two candles under there on baroque candlesticks, keeping a proper temperature.

DOCTER: Was he a very productive printer? Did he put much



out?

DAHLSTROM: Well, it took him a long time to produce a book, yes. What he put out was well-produced, though--well done.

DOCTER: We haven't mentioned the Allens [Lew and Dorothy]. I think they would have to be ranked among the very first, wouldn't they?

DAHLSTROM: I didn't know them very well. I was in their house, and I saw their print shop [the Allen Press] and talked to them. We had dinner there, and we liked them very much. But as I say, I didn't get up to San Francisco very often.

DOCTER: Has the reputation of the Grabhorns been well-earned?

DAHLSTROM: I think so. They were at their very best in the thirties before they began to print these large, folio-sized books, which were very good on their own. But I think that the small, western Americana books that they put out in the early thirties were their very best. You don't see them on the market.

DOCTER: How about Jane Grabhorn?

DAHLSTROM: Don't know her. All I know is what everybody else knows.

DOCTER: One of the things I wanted to ask was whether the union movement in print shops--trade unionism and so on--had had any impact upon your way of doing business or your own life in any way?



DAHLSTROM: Well, as it so happened, I had never worked in a union shop. And the typographic union was an old, established, conservative union; and I never worked in a shop enough to be approached for membership. I doubt that I could have passed their examination.

DOCTER: When you go sit down and start to lay out a book, to design a book, could you tell me some of the practical steps, some of the considerations that you try to work through? Just how do you approach a task of that kind?

DAHLSTROM: Well, the first thing to do, of course, is to cast it up: see how much material you've got in terms of characters, the number of characters to deal with. This is in a book. Of course, mostly when a customer comes in with a book, he has some ideas on the size of the page and on how much he wants to put into it, and usually we've got to figure very closely on it. That's been true of all of the jobs I've done. So the idea of economics is the first consideration.

And then you try to work out what you can do in those limits; the subject, of course, and the historical period of the subject has something to do with your thinking. That determines what choice of the type that you do have to choose from, and so on. I generally lay out the interior of the book before the title page, which is the first thing that everybody looks at, more or less judges the



book by, but it is about the last thing that is designed. In fact, when I came down here, there were two books on the press that had already been designed at Young and McCallister's that he gave me the title pages to do--Warner's Ranch and the Sunset Club book [Sunset Club of Los Angeles, Annals, v. 3].

DOCTER: Do you have copies of those books?

DAHLSTROM: No, I guess I don't have either one of them.

DOCTER: When you try to identify what it is about your own style of design that may be uniquely Grant Dahlstrom, what characteristics, perhaps, might be identified?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I think a very conservative style. Never felt very comfortable with the Bauhaus style, in fact, never did anything in that direction. I patterned myself on Updike and [Bruce] Rogers and Francis Meynell--Curwen Press. There was nothing original in the work I did. My idea was primarily to achieve some order and clarity. I don't know how successful I've always been in that, but that was the intent. In other words, tidy it up.

The one book that comes to my mind that I felt great satisfaction in doing was the catalog of the Huntington Library incunables. I was very pleased and always have been very pleased at what I was able to do with correlating all the various bibliographical elements in that book.

DOCTER: Maybe we could look at that book a little later. Or is there one here in the office?





DAHLSTROM: Yes, there's one here.

DOCTER: Oh, good, it would be a pleasure to look at it. I was saying also that some of the work that I recall of yours seems to me to be not only very classical style but to have the same color Saul Marks always liked: a bit of a grayish look as contrasted with a very heavy black and white emphasis.

DAHLSTROM: Well, I don't know whether I influenced him with that, but we worked somewhat along those lines to begin with. That first book--anything nearing a book--was that Jake Zeitlin catalog that he did, the first thing that he did of that sort. We worked together on that, although it was primarily Saul's design, Saul's idea, all the way through, I may have had some influence in that. Saul's always been influenced by [Pierre Simon] Fournier and his style, as you may have noticed. That's the way he started out, and everything he's done has been a variation of that.

DOCTER: But at the time that you first started working in any collaborative way with Saul, or as a consultant, you had had much more design experience than he had had. Isn't this the case?

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Yes, I set out to become a designer as soon as I could.

DOCTER: Did Saul show any particular tendency in terms of style when you first met him that you saw change or that



you influenced or attempted to influence?

DAHLSTROM: Well, when I first met him, he was working in a typographic shop that set advertising. So he set what he was supposed to set; he set it the way they wanted it set, you see. So when I first met him I didn't see anything of his own work for some time.

DOCTER: Well, now, in terms of the development of your style, you've mentioned a number of influences. Were there particular typefaces that you felt most comfortable with?

DAHLSTROM: Well, the Monotype Bembo, I will always regard as just about the best available type. When I first started out, it was the only type that was available to me. On a machine that I liked was the Caslon 337 Monotype. And I was tied down to that; it was a good face, but I like a little more variety. The next type that was available was the Garamond. And then there's been a profusion of good types since then. On the Linotype, the Germans since the war put out some very good faces that I depend on a great deal: the Aldus and the Trump and the Janus. And I've used also some American faces. Why, I started out with my Linotype, when I bought my Linotype, the only face I had then was Times Roman, which is a little out of style now; I'm a little bored with it myself, too. But those faces that I got from Germany I like very well--next to the



English Monotype faces, which I have only in the cases and combine with those German Linotype faces.

DOCTER: Is there any particular paper that you are most inclined to select for a book, or do you make a highly individual selection for each book?

DAHLSTROM: Well, there are so many papers, different brands of paper, that are available. The paper is usually-- We don't put much into paper, just so it's a good working sheet; otherwise there's no particular thing between one piece of paper and another that's put out now. I don't like these glaring white sheets that are available; I like to have it more of a natural color, a little softer white.

DOCTER: As you look back, you've been in printing and design, advertising design, now for, I guess, almost sixty years continuously. Well, not quite. More like fifty-five.

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: About fifty-five years.

DAHLSTROM: Yes. Fifty-four years.

DOCTER: What would you do differently, if you had your life to live all over again?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I'd work a little harder to begin with. I wasted a lot of time by not applying myself, that's all.

DOCTER: What do you mean?

DAHLSTROM: Just that.

DOCTER: You mean in the earliest--



DAHLSTROM: I wasn't a steady worker. I was a very careless fellow. Slow--not slow, but I just didn't produce enough. I wasn't serious enough.

DOCTER: Would you go into business for yourself earlier? Or do you think--

DAHLSTROM: No, I think I went in about the right time. I knew enough about the operation of a business that when I did go into it--

DOCTER: Have you achieved the main goals that you had for yourself in life?

DAHLSTROM: Well, I think I've achieved more than I expected to. My main goal was to do something that interested me. After a while I found out I needed a little more control over what I did, so that's why I went into business myself.

DOCTER: I wonder if there are any things that we have not touched on or not brought up today that ought to be brought up. Are there any afterthoughts or things that you might want to add on any topic at all that hasn't been explored, that we ought to touch on?

DAHLSTROM: Well, offhand I can't think of a thing. No.

DOCTER: Well, Grant, let's say this. If there are such afterthoughts and second thoughts, we'll get together on another occasion and tape record them, OK?

DAHLSTROM: Uh-huh. Fine.

DOCTER: Meanwhile, do you have time to go over to the





Hamburger Hamlet and get something to eat?

DAHLSTROM: Yes.

DOCTER: Let's do that.

DAHLSTROM: OK.

DOCTER: I'd also like to say thanks very kindly for the time and personal trouble that you've gone to in connection with this. It's been a pleasure.

DAHLSTROM: Well, I want to thank you for your patience and interest. Right now I'm actually a little bored with what I've-- I began to bore myself in the last half hour or so.

DOCTER: I remember Adlai Stevenson said, "A wise man does not try to hurry history," or something like that. Maybe all this'll be less boring to people who don't know the story.

DAHLSTROM: I guess so. [laughter]

DOCTER: Thanks a lot, Grant.

DAHLSTROM: It's a tale twice told to me.



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